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ABSTRACT

An Austrian elementary teacher in a Tyrolean mountain village, who spent a year in the United States learning about the education system, provides her viewpoint on Austrian education in an interview. The teacher discusses the Austrian tracking system as a principal means of achieving educational quality. She believes that as long as the Austrian society is so hierarchical and the values of its people so homogeneous, education leaders feel obliged to produce a labor force structured on a similar manner. In comparing the competition in Austrian schools and in United States schools, she asserts that competition in not such a core social value in Austria as it is in the United States. She explains that Austrian elementary teachers can choose their own textbooks even though there is a national curriculum as long as they accomplish the goals set out in the national curriculum. With Austria divided into nine separate states and about 125 administrative subdistricts, the teacher describes how Austria claims to provide equal educational opportunity through a system of primary responsibility by the federal government and support at other levels. In responding to the fact that secondary school teachers are paid more than elementary teachers, she highlights that Austrian salaries represent significant gradations of teacher value as specialists in the university, the secondary school, and the elementary school. (CK)

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Tracking, Textbooks and Tradition: A Tyrolean Teacher's Perspective

Richard R. Renner

"The majority of parents...rarely wants...any sort of reform of the educational system," laments Volker Krumm, Austria's frustrated educational critic. Three different surveys, he claims, reveal the considerable satisfaction that Austrian parents have with their schools.[1] And, he admits, there are advantages to his country's centralized school system. Centralization is needed to make certain (1) that inequality among citizens will not be widened, but diminished; (2) that there be a consensus in society on common values, language and so on and that such consensus not be endangered; and (3) that civilized society itself will be supplied with enough learning to ensure its survival.[2]

Reasonable enough. Krumm's real quarrel is with history--with Austria's roots. "The monarchs," he says, "had no interest in the general education of the masses but rather in the training of quiet and useful subjects." Today, he says, "Public education does not have the human being in mind but rather the citizen and subject." In fact, "Until after World War I parents had no rights, only duties." Seemingly, Austria suffers from an extreme case of European conservatism.[3]

But critic Krumm is not our Tyrolean teacher. Although she prefers to remain anonymous, Maria, as I call her, has taught for four years in a Tyrolean mountain village near Innsbruck, her native city. Unlike most Austrian elementary teachers, she also possesses an advanced degree in the Social Foundations of Education and has spent a year in America observing the reactions of three members of her household as they attended our local public elementary and secondary schools. She herself audited courses about American education at a local university. Unlike Krumm, and more like the typical Austrian she is proud to be, Maria feels quite satisfied with much that education in her country has achieved. It is in this context that she agreed to respond to five questions about education in her country which we deemed likely to be of interest to practicing educators.

Austria is slightly larger than the state of South Carolina but with twice its population. A federal republic, it is neighbor to six other countries including Germany on the north

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[1]Volker Krumm, "Whose School is It? Comments on a Deplorable State Almost Everybody Appears to be Content With," ERIC Microfiche ED330022, (1989): 16

[2]Krumm, p. 21

[3]Krumm, pp. 5, 6, and 9

and Italy and Croatia on the South. Its nine states are subdivided into about 125 smaller administrative districts. Only two percent of the population, mostly Slavic and Hungarian, do not speak German, the national language. Roman Catholics constitute 84% of the population. Vienna is a large city; the Tyrol, in western Austria, where Maria resides, is mostly rural and mountainous. This is the vantage point from which she views her country's education.

Question 1. Why do Austrians continue to support tracking as a principal means of achieving educational quality?

Maria: Austria has a selective system which means it has a dual or two track system of schools. The traditional academic track leads to the university and professional schools and a vocational track leads to the less prestigious occupations.[4] Three reasons why tracking remains so popular are social tradition, stability as a positive value, and a well-established hierarchical social structure. Austrian educators embrace a long and proud tradition of academic instruction going back to the monastic schools of the 11th century; indeed, the University of Vienna, founded in 1365, lays claim to being the oldest German speaking university in the world.

The first Austrian academic secondary school, which served upper-class boys, was founded by the Jesuits in Vienna in 1552 and was the forerunner of the modern Gymnasium, the German-speaking world's term for an academic secondary school. Completely independent of such institutions were the compulsory elementary schools introduced under Maria Teresa in 1774 to inculcate the 3 R's. This provision of public education preceded Horace Mann's common school reform in America by over six decades. Since 1774, every Austrian child, starting at age six, has had to attend school for four years; today, compulsory schooling extends for nine years, from age 6 to 15. These basic schools were conceived, broadly, as preparation for vocational education.

Contemporary schooling continues to rest on these same two pillars of professional and vocational instruction. At age ten, after attending local public schools all of which are of equivalent quality, no matter where their location, a decision is made, usually by a pupil's teachers, as to whether he is more

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[4]Actually, at the upper secondary level there were, in the 1970's, six recognized types of academic secondary schools and five different types of higher level vocational institutions. However, it is claimed, this assortment of types has a similar basis in principle. OECD, Austria: School Policy (Paris: Organization for Economic Development and Co-operation, 1979), p.42

suited for the professional or the vocational track.[5] Such tracks are often located in separate schools, or if in the same building, in separate programs.

Austrians are well aware of comprehensive education movements in North Germany, Italy, Scandinavia and other countries which have introduced programs in which students from both major tracks attend the same school, an approach long familiar to Americans. A similar effort took place in Austria in the 1970's, but at the grade 1 to 9 level.[6] Educators who were more liberal favored, for the period of compulsory schooling, the same educational experience for all regardless of social class, race or sex. In their opinion, early tracking was undemocratic and socially discriminatory. They felt that greater opportunity and freedom of choice would result if schooling were less elitist and access on the basis of achievement and ability delayed until age 14/15. That plan would also afford females, those from the rural areas and the lower social classes a greater access to the academic secondary schools.

Although these liberal educators then had the support of the Socialist Party and its absolute majority in Parliament, their efforts failed because, in Austria, changes in school legislation require a two-thirds majority. This constitutional restriction was enacted in 1962 when both major parties--The Conservative People's Party and the Socialist Party--felt that education was too important to permit any single party to modify school laws or introduce major structural changes just because it happened to hold a majority of votes.[7]

Since there are major differences in the educational platforms of the principal parties, it is very difficult to achieve the two-thirds majority in Parliament required to permit

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[5] In grades 1-4, the same teacher is responsible for teaching the pupil in the basic subjects for the entire four years. The aim is to establish a bond between pupil and teacher and parent and teacher. OECD, p.17

[6] It was abolished in 1982. Karl Heinz Gruber, "Unlearnt European Lessons: Why Austria Abandoned the Comprehensive School Experiments and Restored the Gymnasium, in ed. David Phillips, Lessons of Cross National Comparison in Education, Wallingford, Oxfordshire: Triangle Books, 1992, p.148

[7] "Stability, harmony and continuity are highly esteemed social values while 'reform' and 'change', with their inherent conflict potential, seem to have latent disquieting connotations for many Austrians." Parliament and the Ministry are perceived as the only legitimate agents for any kind of change. Gruber, 1992, pp.147-148

school change. As a result, reforms have taken place which are quite gradual and create an impression of a school system which is static and stable. Why did the Conservative People's Party object so vehemently to the introduction of comprehensive schools--schools in which students with a wider range of abilities and educational goals would attend classes together? Mostly they feared the erosion of the quality of the education which the able and gifted would receive. For Conservatives, quality was possible only if pupils were assigned to a track in accordance with their demonstrated capacity to perform successfully. Since there was no way to fundamentally change the traditional selective system, a number of compromises were worked out which made the two track system more permeable. Today, for example, Austria no longer insists that tracking decisions be irreversible; rather, it has modified the system with bridges and crossovers between the various types of schools. This makes transfer from one track to the other easier and tends to prevent late-blooming pupils from winding up in career dead ends. Despite these concessions, the educational system remains highly structured and selective.[8] Of the age cohort which qualifies for the Maturity Certificate, a qualification which indicates satisfactory completion of academic secondary schooling, about half enroll in a college or university.

There has never been a serious challenge to the idea that there should be two separate tracks of upper level secondary education--one leading to the Maturity Certificate and higher education and the other emphasizing vocational education. The concept of selection assumes that only those most qualified to master an educational program should be entitled to enter it. Austrians believe that selection is necessary and that the way it is being conducted is fair. This sentiment is even more widely accepted now that school tuition charges have been abolished and pupils are provided with free textbooks and transportation to school. Proponents argue that selection has been based on ability alone and that no student is excluded from secondary or higher education because of his or her parents' limited financial resources. Still, not all able youth actually attain the highest

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[8]Parallel to the vocational schools in the dual track secondary system are the general secondary schools. About one-fourth of all students in this age group attend the latter. Once a student chooses his branch or specialization, then his curriculum is fixed and few electives are possible. Karen Lukas, A Study of the Educational System of Austria and a Guide to the Academic Placement of Students in Educational Institutions of the United States, Washington D.C.: Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 1987, p.16

levels of schooling due to the limitations imposed by parental background and limited social ambition.[9]

The whole controversy over tracking and the corollary notion that schools ought to select and push forward those most able to profit from further instruction seems to boil down to the fact that as long as Austrian society is so hierarchical and the values of its people continue to be so homogeneous, educational leaders feel obliged to produce a labor force structured in a similar manner.

Question 2. Why are Austrian schools less competitive than American schools?

Maria: Competition is not such a core social value in Austria as it is in the United States. American schools are very competitive in the sense that children are constantly taught the importance of out-competing each other--in many schools this is a primary value. American children are compared, and compare themselves with each other more than they compare themselves with their own ability and effort. Moreover, in an American class you can be number one even though you may have done a pretty bad job--just so long as your classmates have done even worse. In America, grading on the curve, or the use of norm referenced rather than criterion referenced standards is common.

Austrian students like to compete too but usually in a different way. They don't compete with fellow students but with particular goals they want to attain. This presupposes that explicit goals exist and in Austria they do in the form of a national curriculum.

For every type of school there exists a curriculum, defined by national experts, that sets the goals that must be achieved if a student is to be promoted to the next grade level. These curriculums are a way of making sure that each student, in comparable schools throughout the country, at a particular grade level, adequately masters the same material, though not necessarily at the same time of year. The national curriculum delineates these goals at various levels of specificity, from the very general to detailed achievement objectives for each subject. It also spells out how many hours per week each subject is to be taught.

By establishing specific goals the national curriculum also

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[9]Transfer rates to the academic high school (Gymnasium) in 1988 were the following: Rural alpine districts 10%; Austrian average 30%; Vienna average 56%; and Vienna 13 and 19th districts (upper middle class) 80%. Gruber claims that only about 30% of those entering this program actually graduate from it; many transfer into other types of schools. Gruber, 1992, p.151

sets firm criteria by which pupils' achievement can be measured and evaluated. Pupils in Austria are graded on a five point scale with "1" representing "very good" and "5" as "unsatisfactory/failure." This scale refers only to how well the student has actually achieved the goals set out in the curriculum. There is no implied comparison with fellow students and no ranking in the class. However, the two Austrian teens in Maria's household ranked in the upper 1 1/2 percent of their American high school class.

Question 3. Since Austria has a national curriculum, how is it possible that Austrian elementary teachers can choose their own textbooks?

Maria: Textbooks are published to conform to a national curriculum that sets out the goals but does not tell exactly how to achieve them. Education authorities recognize that in pedagogy there is more than one way to achieve success. However, textbooks help the teacher to make the goals of instruction more concrete. Normally they are written by teams of experienced teachers, especially for the level of compulsory schooling. These must then be approved by special adoption committees who decide whether or not the teaching materials help to achieve the goals set out in the curriculum and whether the language and content of texts are suitable for the intended age group. Approval committees generally consist of three or four teachers chosen by the Federal Ministry of Education and the Arts. At present, more than 70 approval committees are at work. Teachers may freely adopt from the approved list any of the textbooks and tests. It is not necessary for them to use the same text simply because other teachers in their school are doing so. The principal has no say in this matter.

Teachers can even decide to use no texts at all, but they are not likely to do that since all pupils are entitled to free copies. These are consumable in that they belong to the students and not the school. Many take the form of workbooks so that the student may write in them.

The federal government has been spending the equivalent of US$85,000,000 on texts for 1,100,000 students at the 1-9 grade level. This amounts to about US$80 per student. Elementary students get books worth about US$20; at the upper levels students get far more.

Teachers are free to choose their own texts and method of teaching, just so long as they accomplish the goals set out in the national curriculum. Principals and school inspectors are charged with seeing that these goals are being attained in every class. Their job is to assess the teachers' efficiency in reaching goals and to hold them responsible in cases where they

are not successful.[10] Nowadays, since there is a surplus of teachers, especially at the secondary level, those who do not do satisfactory work are likely to be dismissed.

Question 4. How can Austria claim to provide equal educational opportunity when it is divided up into nine separate states and about 125 administrative sub-districts?

Maria: The federal government has been primarily responsible for policy and supervision of the formal educational system since 1962. At the same time, the states participate in the day to day administration of schools and have even delegated some measure of responsibility to the local districts. Responsibility for the public schools is centralized in the Federal Ministry of Education and Arts which administers the state school boards which also administer the city and/or district school boards. All of this managed by lifetime-tenured principals. School curriculum is formulated within the national ministry as are the regulations concerned with the implementation of its programs. For example, the maximum class size for an elementary class (30 pupils) or the length of the school day is the same in all of the states. Education is free of charge to citizens and permanent residents, even at the university level.

National government provides approximately 2/3 of total public expenditures for education at all levels; the States and communities provide the remainder. Such local aid takes the form of "materials" such as elementary school buildings which are the responsibility of the local communities; academic secondary schools are built by the federal government. Currently 9.2 percent of the national budget is spent for education.

All teachers' salaries are paid in accordance with a national salary schedule. The pay is the same whether a teacher instructs in Vienna or a remote Tyrolean valley with only four pupils; actual salary depends on the type of public school at which teachers serve, the professional qualification they possess and the 'Gehaltesstuffe' or years of experience that they have attained. An academic secondary school teacher is paid at a higher salary schedule rate than an elementary teacher. Pay increases occur in two year increments.

Question 5. Why do secondary school teachers get paid more than elementary teachers?

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[10]Gruber, 1992, p.148. The extent of bureaucratization and legalization is high. The dominance of jurists in the Ministry of Education is said to have lead to an all-pervasive codification of educational decision-making and reduced the freedom of teachers to the small domain of classroom pedagogy. Only up to 5% of the schools in each off Austria's nine provinces may be exempt from standardization

Maria: Austrians think of teachers as specialists. Some specialists are more valuable than others and therefore command higher rates of compensation. The national salary schedule reflects a particular hierarchy. University teachers get paid more than non-university post-secondary teachers who in turn are paid more than academic secondary school teachers who are paid more than general secondary school teachers who are paid more than elementary school teachers.

These differences also correspond to differences in a teacher's education and professional training. Elementary and general secondary teachers are educated in teacher training academies (Padagogische Akademien) while college degrees are required for all others. Both elementary and general secondary teachers are required to complete a six-term pre-service teacher training program. Elementary teachers are educated at a more general level whereas the general secondary school teachers have to choose two major teaching subjects in addition to their general courses. Expertise in teaching methodology, though valuable in a supplementary way, is not considered a specialty. In effect, the greater one's level of expertise in a particular subject, the better the salary. Unlike most American public school salary schedules which compensate the first grade teacher and high school physics teacher equally if they possess the same amount of experience and degree, Austrian salaries represent significant gradations of teacher value.[11]

Conclusion: Maria has highlighted some of the strengths that Austrians see in their educational system. For many, centralization is a great equalizer. Educational goals are more likely to be attained if they are explicitly and publicly identified by a national ministry. Teachers enjoy a measure of autonomy in teaching methods and in choosing teaching materials so long as they also remain accountable for actually achieving results. Selection and tracking are used to preserve a high quality instructional environment at the secondary level while in the elementary school, a high level of quality and equality is provided to all children during their most formative school years.

The salary structure proclaims that some teaching specialities are more valuable than others and should be

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[11]Referring to the relative freedom which British teachers regard as a cherished right, Gruber observes that such freedom "uncomfortably challenges the restricted professional self-concepts of continental teachers, their work-to-rule mentality, and their low job commitment which frequently does not go beyond the bleak transmission of knowledge." Karl Heinz Gruber, "A Note on Failure to Appreciate British Primary Education in Germany and Austria," Comparative Education, 25 (3)(1989): 364

compensated accordingly. It recognizes also that some educational issues may become so highly politicized that legislative devices are needed to discourage frivolous reforms. Stability and order are prized characteristics of sound schools.

Nonetheless, Rudolf Scholten, Federal Minister of Education, has made greater autonomy for the individual school a priority. Each institution now has a committee where teachers, pupils and parents are represented although it has no power of decision. And, in the fall of 1992, pilot schools were to be authorized and allowed to deviate up to 10-15% per subject in weekly hours taught thus freeing time for other activities such as helping pupils who are lagging behind. In this and other ways the National Ministry is trying to be less authoritarian in tone.[12]

Does American education have anything to contribute to Austria? Maria is not so sure. She admired the social assertiveness which America schools seem to encourage in many of their pupils and she thought that more of that would be nice at home. Yet education must also emphasize knowledge. How, she wondered, could her two teenagers, with such astonishingly little effort, and somewhat handicapped by language, manage to rank so high in their American high school class? "Maybe," she said, with much hesitancy and uncertainty, "it was the preparation that they got in their Austrian elementary school?"

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Maria is the pseudonym of an Austrian teacher who wishes to emphasize that her views are personal rather than those of an expert.

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